

# AL DOMANSKIS

## Productive Attorney Plans Clients' Transactions Wisely

by Keith D. Picher

By all accounts, Alexander R. Domanskis of **Boodell & Domanskis, LLC** is a prolific and efficient lawyer.

Domanskis spots someone entering the office and quickly steps forward to greet him briefly. One of the law firm's perfectly able attorneys can kick things off, he reassures the business client, and at more affordable rates than at other firms.

Next, Domanskis hands a list containing more than 20 names to someone else who sought just four or five. As he speaks with those who can follow him easily, his pace quickens just enough to get more done without rushing anyone.

While maintaining a law practice, he once coached about 100 basketball games a year for several teams: a traveling team, an elementary school team, and several Lithuanian American teams that he took to play in Canada and Lithuania.

"He's a high-volume producer," says Jae Choi Kim, a Korean American attorney. Kim met Domanskis in 1992 through his leadership role in the Illinois Ethnic Coalition. The group spoke out in the wake of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles and after the subsequent riots following the Chicago Bulls championship.

In those years, Kim ran a family dry cleaning business. She decided to hire Domanskis to help the company deal with some corporate issues and to

handle litigation involving an environmental matter.

Kim eventually earned a law degree and accepted a job offer from Domanskis as she approached graduation. Today, she is of counsel to the firm.

She describes Domanskis as "a wonderful counselor because he really knows and empathizes with clients." He also excels at assessing risks and can be very aggressive in transactional work because of his litigation background, she adds.

"He does the work of three attorneys by himself," she says with a laugh.

### An Early Start with Huge Cases

Two years after his parents emigrated to Chicago after fleeing from the Soviet Union's occupation of Lithuania, Domanskis was born at St. Anthony's Hospital on Chicago's West Side. He first lived in Brighton Park and later moved to Evergreen Park and Palos Park.

His mother was a doctor and his father was an engineer. Domanskis didn't consider a legal career until high school. He met his first lawyer as a senior at Carl Sandburg High School when the lawyer defended him after a person who stole his wallet presented the then-pictureless driver's license to a police officer when getting a traffic ticket.

After graduating from the University of Michigan *magna cum laude* in history and *cum laude* in law,

Domanskis clerked for a senior federal district court judge, Edwin A. Robson. Robson was a founder of the Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation, formed to help consolidate multidistrict cases, centralize process and conserve resources.

As a law clerk, Domanskis worked on a massive price fixing conspiracy case involving the sale of folding cartons. The class action case settled in 1979 as Domanskis completed the second year of his clerkship. At the time, the \$200 million class action settlement was greater than any previous one.

Judge Robson and Judge Hubert L. Will appointed four attorneys to distribute the funds: two of the lead plaintiff's counsel, the newly practicing Domanskis, and his future law partner, Thomas J. Boodell Jr.

With interest rates around 20 percent, the group made \$600,000 on the float while sending out checks. They successfully resolved their motion for a temporary restraining order against the Federal Reserve to preserve the high interest rates and exempt the settlement fund from the Carter administration restrictions aimed at lowering interest rates.

Domanskis practiced at Ross & Hardies—years before McGuireWoods LLP acquired the firm—focusing on large antitrust cases and commercial litigation. Early on, a smaller client sought his



services.

“The person had spent about \$30,000 with another lawyer in 1979 over a shareholder dispute,” Domanskis says. “It was over a restaurant at 75 E. Wacker Drive ... and there was a personal judgment entered against my client the day I came in.”

After forcing out the other shareholder and resolving various disputes, Domanskis’ client was able to enter into a joint venture with Bacino’s, which continues to operate there today.

As a result, Domanskis began to counsel more restaurants and bars. His firm represents between 20 and 25 such clients today, primarily in Chicago and the suburbs, either in purchases or sales or in ongoing representation. They include Taco Joint, Taxim, Irish Times, Vora, Tamarind, Bodi, Union Park Lounge and Pearl.

Dan Pedemonte, a hospitality and retail broker and a licensed real estate agent in many states, works with many restaurants in River North and elsewhere in the heart of Chicago. He met Domanskis—who was representing a buyer—years ago while brokering a restaurant deal in Greek Town.

“I liked his demeanor, his confidence, his experience,” Pedemonte says. “He’s a very balanced attorney, and I don’t use that word lightly.”

“He’s practical and reasonable. Al is very efficient and timely. He prioritizes his clients and doesn’t stack them up. Today we don’t have the luxury of not making each transaction a priority.”

## Going in House and Global

After getting involved with the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, including the Chicago Public School Desegregation case, Domanskis made partner and second-chaired an eight-week trial. Afterward, the client asked Domanskis to work in house. He agreed and continued at Ross & Hardies as of counsel.

The client, Intercounty Title Company of Illinois, offered Domanskis “a tremendous opportunity to do transactional work and to transition from litigation,” he says. While handling claims and running a mortgage credit reporting business, Domanskis estimates he typically fielded more than 100 phone calls each day.

“I was providing advice to company officers, closers, underwriters, and customers from 1986 to 1990,” he says. The company thought voice mail was poor client service then. Getting uncomfortable with the company’s directions to him, Domanskis left before certain practices he had nothing to do with brought Intercounty down.

While at Intercounty and continuing after rejoining Ross & Hardies as a partner, Domanskis worked on his own international matters involving Lithuania and Vietnam. Both countries were experiencing the growing pains of moving from a command to a market economy.

Although he had long been interested in

international politics, Domanskis became aware of how big the world was during an around the world trip in 1974. His stops included Lithuania and Poland—where he visited relatives—then Moscow, Istanbul, Israel, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and east to Japan and home before starting law school a week later.

As Lithuania became independent and moved to a market economy, Domanskis began visiting the country almost every year from 1988 to 2000. He helped clients understand the business of international contracts through fairly extensive outlines and presentations in Lithuanian.

He also set up businesses and even established the first dollar account in a bank in Lithuania. He performed similar tasks in Vietnam.

After a tax partner from McDermott, Will & Emery helped to set up a Mars Candy factory in Lithuania, the firm approached Domanskis about heading up an office there.

“I knew the president, the vice presidents, most of the cabinet ministers, and more than half of the parliament members,” he says.

“It would have been a great experience, but I would no longer have been a Chicago lawyer,” says Domanskis. With the time commitments in

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Lithuania and all the travel required to drum up business, it didn’t make sense for his family either.

## The Lithuanian World Center

In the United States, Domanskis helped to plan and develop the Lithuanian World Center in Lemont in the late 1980s.

A New York client asked Domanskis to represent it in purchasing a closed Vincentian seminary with the 230 acres that surrounded it. After extensive hearings with the village, Domanskis took Lemont to court and secured a consent decree that provided for planned unit development zoning and the use of the building for a prospective community center.

About a year later when his client exited the Chicago market, Domanskis joined with a group of other Lithuanian Americans to purchase the building. He served as the Lithuanian World Center’s first president.

Domanskis was heavily involved politically in the local Lithuanian community. This included community organizing and securing permits for Lithuanian marches in the Loop to support the country’s struggle for independence.

“He was like our Thomas Jefferson,” says George Riskus, chairman of the board of the

Lithuanian World Center, the largest such center outside Lithuania. “He was there from the beginning, and he’s still there.”

About 30 Lithuanian organizations now call the center their home. It houses a Saturday school for more than 600 children, a Lithuanian Catholic Mission, senior citizen housing, basketball leagues and soccer.

“It’s a 150,000 square foot building and Al put it all together,” Riskus says. “He was able to negotiate and get us the Lithuanian World Center for around \$800,000, and at that point it was probably a \$5 million property.”

“All of the Lithuanian organizations depend on him,” says Riskus. “Every time you turn around, he’s doing another good act of charity, and he never asks for anything in return.”

Today Boodell & Domanskis represents more than 20 not-for-profits pro bono.

## More Real Estate and Workouts

In 1994 Domanskis became a name partner at Shaw Gussis & Domanskis and began to handle construction loans. His first was for a parking garage at Madison and Wells streets. He then handled other deals in Illinois, Missouri and Michigan.

Eventually clients asked him to assist on large construction transactions in New York, including several loans of between \$15 million and \$70 million for apartment buildings and shopping centers.

At one point, several months after a successful loan closing, the borrower contacted Domanskis to represent him.

“The person from the borrower’s side was getting very friendly, and I thought, ‘Maybe I need to be tougher in these transactions,’” he recalls.

“Obviously, I couldn’t represent him, but it reminded me that if you handle things fairly and well, you don’t have to be difficult,” he says.

Domanskis continued to do more local loan work and also grew his existing practices in general real estate and zoning. In 2002 he joined forces with Boodell—with whom he worked occasionally since the folding carton case—to open Boodell & Domanskis, LLC. The firm has since grown to 12 lawyers.

The slowdown in the economy and in real estate hit Domanskis hard in 2009. He had not done litigation for a long time. Suddenly the firm realized it needed to switch gears and be ready for workouts.

“My business was down 40 percent in the first six months of 2009 because we were so bank oriented,” he says. “By the end of the year, I’d caught up to equal the previous year, and the following year we did three times the revenue of the previous year.”

Domanskis seeks to be proactive by strategically planning for his clients. Early on, he handled municipal work. He also was involved with securing

zoning approval for one of the country's first drive-thru McDonalds and for one of the first banks located in a grocery store. He also was involved with the complex planning at the Lithuanian World Center from the ground up.

## **Solution Worse than Problem?**

As a planner, Domanskis noted the unintended consequences of government responses to the commercial and residential real estate slowdowns. Markets tend to correct themselves, he believes, and it's risky to tinker.

For commercial loans, Domanskis thinks the government's decision to begin the requirement of mark-to-market loan valuations for loan renewals at the lowest part of the economic cycle made no sense. Commercial loans typically run in five-year cycles—not 20 or 30 years as residential loans do—so setting values 20 to 40 percent down in one cycle means the next one will be near that level.

"We had all these small community bank failures that would not have happened," he explains.

On the residential side a similar mistake happened, he says. At the lowest point of the housing market the government for the first time required appraisers to include foreclosure sales in their valuations. By doing so, this contributed to even more foreclosures and further depression of values.

"You took neighborhoods like Englewood where properties sold for \$100,000 several years ago and the medium home price recently was shown in *Chicago Magazine* as \$6,000, which is absolutely outrageous," he says.

"I had trucker clients in Markham who were taking four-bedroom brick homes near expressways that previously sold for more than \$100,000 now going for \$20,000. They picked them up for truckers who were gone the whole week, and for \$20,000, what can you lose?"

"In the meantime, many community banks have gone under or have been crippled negatively affecting their relationships with small businesses and substantially weakening Chicago neighborhoods and surrounding villages.

Domanskis' concern extends beyond communities, their banks and small businesses. It goes to the heart of his understanding of a lawyer's role.

"I learned from Al that a lawyer's role is not just to handle the problems of the day, but to see and minimize future risks the client may run into," says Kim. "And you don't know what risks they may run into without knowing what the client intends, what the client's plans are, and what the client aspires for.

"Al really gets to know the client so he can foresee and do planning to minimize risk," she says. ■